



# **H.P.** **Sorcery**

***The Unnamable Returns* this month, spearheading a clutch of movies based on the scary stories of *Re-Animator* man H.P. Lovecraft. Up from the depths of hell comes Allan Bryce to examine some of the movies that have been made from an HP source (get it?)**



hairy monster who had been locked in the attic for years. This routine chiller wasn't up to much, but it was still a whole lot better than *Curse Of The Crimson Altar* (1968), a dreadful adaptation of Lovecraft's *Dreams In The Witch House* which wasted the talents of Christopher Lee, Boris Karloff, Michael Gough and Barbara Steele.

Lovecraft fans had to wait twenty years for the first movie to really do the writer justice. *Re-Animator* (1985 - Entertainment In Video) was a knockout terror tale based on a Lovecraft short story published in a 1921 humour magazine called *Strange Brew*. Jeffrey Combs starred as medical student Herbert West, who devises a serum to bring the dead back to life and then causes a great deal of carnage down at the local morgue. Outrageously over-the-top in certain scenes (particularly the bit where a severed head makes lecherous advances to tasty Barbara Crampton), the film was a perfectly balanced mixture of solid scares and sick black humour and it did so well that a sequel - *Bride Of Re-*

*Animator* (Medusa) was concocted a few years later. Unfortunately, the latter was more of a homage to *The Bride Of Frankenstein*, and not half as much fun to watch.

Stuart Gordon had nothing to do with *Bride Of Re-Animator* (the sequel was directed by *Re-Animator*'s producer, Brian Yuzna), but he did traverse Lovecraft territory again with *From Beyond* (1987 - Vestron), a much underrated movie which once again starred Jeffrey Combs and dealt with the scientific search for a sixth sense (which manifests itself in the shape of a brain-eating tentacle that projects from our hero's forehead). This enables Combs to see horrible creatures swimming in the air, and rather unfortunately also enables these creatures to see him!

The box office success of *Re-Animator* sent many low budget filmmakers scurrying out to plow through old Lovecraft stories. One



of these was Juan Piquer Simon, the Spanish director who brought us such poverty row treats as *The Rift* and *Monster Island* and never even had the decency to apologise afterwards. His modest contribution to the Lovecraft revival was *Cthulhu Mansion*, starring British actor Frank Finlay as a magician who discovers an ancient tome that is the key to unleashing a fearful monster. Shortly afterwards, Finlay is taken prisoner by a gang of lowlife thugs and calls upon the demons of Cthulhu to rescue him. Columbia Tristar released this one straight to video without any fanfare.

A great deal more fun was *Cast A Deadly Spell* (Warner), a Lovecraft



The name H.P. Lovecraft sounds to the uninformed ear like the above-the-door notice on a specialist shop that hires out marital aids. But if you're any kind of horror buff you'll know that it really belongs to one of the greatest writers of macabre fiction the world has ever known. During the decades since his death, Lovecraft has become acknowledged as a master of modern horror second only to Poe. But while there have been a great many movies based on Poe stories, Lovecraft has (until recently) been shamefully ignored.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was a lifelong resident of Providence, Rhode Island and remained a studious antiquarian and virtual recluse until his untimely death. Poor health as a young boy led him to read voluminously and the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Machen inspired his own writing career. Although far from prolific, his fiction, poems and essays received popular acclaim in the amateur press, and through such pulp magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*.

All of these stories may very well have been lost to the modern day reading public but for the fact that in 1939 August Derleth and Donald Wandrei decided to reprint them in book form, for their newly established Arkham House publishing label. So popular was the first book, *The Outsider And Others*, that they eventually went on to publish Lovecraft's entire output.

The problem with adapting Lovecraft's work for the screen is twofold. He was a stylist gifted with the ability to weave elaborate wordscapes filled with memorable phrases like 'eldritch strangeness' and 'eldritch atmosphere.' His talent was for suggesting much while showing little, relying on words like 'unspeakable' to tease his readers' imaginations. This talent aided his other great contribution, the invention of an original mythology (dubbed the 'Cthulhu Mythos' by his fans) which was based on the premise that a race of Elder Gods, or powerful beings from another dimension - with names like Cthulhu and Yog Sothoth - had ruled the Earth before the dawn of man, and were ever eager to return and re-assert their dominion.

These two facets of Lovecraft's work create problems for film-makers, who must not only wrestle with expanding his short stories to feature length, but must also find a cinematic method of conveying the sense of malign conspiracy underlying many of his later plots. In some ways the most effective adaptations have been *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*, which

are essentially original Stuart Gordon creations loosely inspired by less-important early tales. But more about them later.

The first Lovecraft-inspired movie of note was Roger Corman's 1963 production of *The Haunted Palace*, which took its title from a poem by Poe but its main storyline from Lovecraft's *The Case Of Charles Dexter Ward*. Vincent Price starred as the story's title character, who arrives in the New England village of Arkham to claim the palatial mansion of his great-great-grandfather Joseph Curwen, a black magician burned at the stake over a hundred years ago. But before long

he has been taken over by the spirit of his dead ancestor (his exact double, of course) and sets about executing an evil plan to create a race of mutants who will enable the dark gods to return and rule the earth.

*The Haunted Palace* was a good looking but minor movie, and I suppose that much the same could be said of the screen's next Lovecraft adaptation. *Monster Of Terror* (US title: *Die Monster Diel*) was shot in England and was an atmospheric but stilted film version of Lovecraft's 1927 *Colour Out Of Space*. It's interesting to note that the same Lovecraft story also furnished the basis for *The Curse* (1978), a fairly routine effort directed by actor David Keith, and was Stephen King's unofficial inspiration for the *Creepshow* story where King plays a gormless farmer turned into a plant monster after he starts meddling with a sinister meteorite.

Daniel Haller had another stab at Lovecraft in 1969 when he made *The Dunwich Horror*, the plot of which was derived principally from Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*. This film centres on mad Dean Stockwell's plans to restore the ancient powers to their former evil dominion over the world. All he has to do to accomplish this is sacrifice virginal Sandra Dee in an ancient fertility rite. But needless to say, something goes wrong and he ends up being carted off by the same

ghastly forces he has summoned. The film was strong on atmosphere, but was spoiled by the final scenes, which were ruined by the addition of psychedelic 60s special effects that make the film look totally ridiculous when viewed nowadays.

Equally disappointing was *The Shattered Room* (1967), a dreary effort shot in England in the late 60s. Based very loosely on a Lovecraft story revised by his disciple August Derleth, the film told of a young girl (Carol Lynley) who returned to her childhood home after the death of her parents and was menaced by a gang of thugs (led by a young Oliver Reed) and a

